
WilmerHale Team Helps in Historic Exoneration Tied to Malcolm X's Murder

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A WilmerHale legal team played an important role in the reinvestigation that led to the long-overdue and historic exoneration of two men convicted decades ago for the February 1965 assassination of Malcolm X.

The team, led by WilmerHale Partners [April Williams](#) and [Debo Adegbile](#), assisted firm client [The Innocence Project](#) by wading through historical records and researching and analyzing constitutional law issues related to the notorious crime, police investigations and convictions following the murder of the famous Black nationalist civil rights leader.

WilmerHale's efforts were focused on the wrongful conviction of Muhammad Abdul Aziz, age 83, known as Norman 3X Butler at the time of the killing. Aziz, along with Khalil Islam, who died in 2009 and was once known as Thomas 15X Johnson, always maintained their innocence. Both men were exonerated at the same New York trial court proceeding on November 18, 2021.

A third man who actually confessed to the killing was convicted in 1966 along with Aziz and Islam. That man, Mujahid Abdul Halim, once known as Talmadge X Hayer, testified at trial to Aziz and Islam's innocence. Still, they were convicted, spending more than 20 years in prison before securing parole.

After many years during which both men sought their exonerations, their cause gained momentum after the release of the Netflix documentary "Who Killed Malcolm X?" featuring historian Abdur-Rahman Muhammad. The film raised doubts about much of the original case against Aziz and Islam.

The film and the efforts of the Innocence Project spurred Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus R. Vance, Jr. in January 2020 to open a reinvestigation of the case at the request of attorneys representing Aziz and the estate of Islam. WilmerHale lawyers worked pro bono to support the Innocence Project as part of this effort.

The 22-month reinvestigation ultimately determined that local prosecutors, the New York Police Department, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation knowingly withheld material, exculpatory evidence. The Manhattan district attorney and lawyers for the wrongly convicted men filed a

successful joint motion to vacate the judgments of conviction and dismiss the indictment.

Besides Partners Williams and Adegbile, the WilmerHale team included Counsel [Claire Bergeron](#), Senior Associates [Rebecca Lee](#) and [Joshua Vittor](#), and Associate [Sara Maldonado](#).

The Innocence Project is a non-profit founded in 1992 by Peter Neufeld and Barry Scheck at the Cardozo School of Law. It has won the exonerations of nearly 400 people, typically through post-conviction DNA testing. It also advocates for changes to the criminal justice system to prevent wrongful convictions.